

## Skies of Fire

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Summary: Dragonrider AU. Maka and her fellow dragonriders find that there is more to their draconic companions than they initially thought. SoMa.

## Skies of Fire

I wrote a dragonrider AU before, but it was so horrible, that I deleted it. Then, a user on tumblr, jazzie560, posted some fantastic Soul Eater dragonrider AU art along with an interesting prompt. So, I decided, why not give it another shot? I probably should have sat back and let Poisoned Scarlet, the queen of SoMa AUs, just write it, as she said in a note that she was already thinking about what to write, but I couldn't help myself!

So, take two! Wish me luck!

Disclaimer: I do not own Soul Eater! Original prompt was by jazzie560 on tumblr. I also apologize if I'm stepping on anyone's toes here. This was heavily inspired by the fantastic movie, "How to Train Your Dragon," which I also don't own.

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"Did you know that wild dragons past your age are a rare sight?"

Maka glanced at her companion, a white dragon twice her size. He was laying on the ground, his eyes closed. She was sitting, leaning against him, a book in her hands.

"You see a lot of riders with dragons older than you, but even those dragons haven't been seen since the riders left."

Maka paused. The senior riders had left to fight a war against another tribe. Her mother and father had been among them. While the riders were critical in the battles against Arachne's forces, they

had left the those not old enough or experienced enough behind with no one to continue training them.

Maka's life since the older riders left had been mostly focused on self-study. Practicing riding with Soul, her dragon companion, and flight maneuvers with her friends. But besides that, there was little they could do to advance their studies on their own. A lot of dragon lore, too much in Maka's opinion, was passed down in oral traditions.

The kicker of it all was, her mother, who was 'retired' from riding, was about to tell Maka something very important. Then things had worsened on the warfront, forcing her and anyone else capable to go and assist.

It was frustrating, but there was little Maka could do. Her mother had promised to tell her that important thing when she got back.

Soul's tail was swishing lazily, and aside from the fact that he occasionally cracked an eye open at his rider's comments, Maka could have been convinced that he was asleep.

"What do you think of that?" She asked, "You're about to become a rarity!"

The dragon opened an eye and snorted. Maka shook her head, "Show a little more pride! Its around your age that we riders actually start learning combat. Its a very important time of your life, you know!"

Soul actually opened his eyes and lifted his head at that. His red eyes, gleaming with an intelligence not seen in any other breed of animal, gazed at her. He cocked his head, as if contemplating something. He then shook it from side to side and made a rumbling noise.

"What does that mean?" Maka stood up and snapped her book shut, "You know what? I think we should go out and get in some fire practice. Get you off your lazy ass."

Soul's tail came around and whacked the book out of her hand. "Hey!" She leaned over to pick it up. She looked up to glare at him, only to find that he was staring out the open window of the barn he called home. She looked out and realized that while she had been in here, night had fallen.

"Oh, I must have lost track of time," she reached over and ran a hand along her companion's side, "I'm going to bed. Get some rest, okay?"

He responded to that be flopping his head back on the ground. Suppressing a giggle, she walked over to the entrance of the barn and grabbed the fur coat hanging next to the door. As she put it on and prepared to step outside, she took one last look at her friend.

"Good night."

n/n/n/n

The main hall was the most crowded place in the village on cold mornings. It said a lot for the effects of the war, when Maka still had plenty of room to move around to her usual table, where she would have once struggle to push through.

The smell of smoked fish, much of it freshly caught from the ocean that sustained their livelihood, along with the company of what friends were left was enough to briefly take everyone's minds off their troubles. Maka was no exception, as she sat at the table with her friends and fellow dragonriders-in-training.

"Good morning Maka," Kid greeted. Kid was the son of the village leader, Lord Death, who had been given that name by his enemies. Kid was notable in that, unlike most, he had two dragons. It had been a convoluted series of events that had led him to taking on twice the workload of the other riders.

"Good morning Kid," Maka returned, "How was the meeting with the elders?"

"Fair," he replied, "With my father gone to lead the war effort, some of them were expecting me to...step up." He smiled lightly, "Thankfully they were a minority, and quickly reminded that I am not of age to be a full-fledged dragonrider, much less leader of the village."

"That's a relief to hear," she smiled, "We all have enough on our plates without you being forced into taking leadership duties."

The doors of the main hall suddenly swung open. A loud voice rang through the hall,

"LISTEN UP EVERYONE! I, THE GREAT BLACK\*STAR, AM HERE TO GRACE YOU WITH MY GODLY PRESENCE!"

Predictably, no even turned their head to acknowledge the boy who was stormed into the hall. Black\*Star scoffed, then made his way over to the table where Maka and Kid were sitting.

"Hey guys!" He plopped himself down and stretched, "I feel great this morning! Like I could punch out a fully grown wild dragon!"

"You'd be scorched first," Maka pointed out flatly.

"Hah! Fire doesn't scare me!"

"Say that when you're being treated for burns."

Tuning Black\*Star out as he continued ranting, Maka continued her conversation with Kid. A while later, she heard quiet sobbing. She turned her head. Her hand immediately flew to her mouth at what she saw.

It was Kim, another one of Maka's friends. Her face was covered by her hands, but from the pitiful sounds she was making, something was very wrong.

As if to punctuate the situation, she was being helped by Ox. Ox had been pursuing Kim for ages, but she had always rejected his advances.

Now he was gently guiding her to the table and helping her sit down, before taking a seat himself.

"What happened?" Maka asked, as Kim placed her arms on the table and buried herself in them. Maka glimpsed the other girl's red-rimmed eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

Ox took a deep breath, "Its...hard to say..."

Kid got up a little from his seat, "Was there a report from the front?"

Ox shook his head, "No, it had nothing to do with that. At least we hope. But its just as bad." He took a deep breath before speaking, "Jacqueline went missing last night."

Maka gasped. Jacqueline was Kim's dragon.

"Perhaps she just decided to go for a quick flight?" Kid suggested, worry clear in his tone.

"That's not normal for her, if she did," Ox replied, "You know how she is. She's well behaved, not the kind to try things behind her rider's back like some dragons." He gave Maka a pointed look. Maka responded with a brief glare. She couldn't help it if Soul liked to mess with her.

"Even if she did decide to go for a flight," Ox continued, "She knows when Kim comes for her in the morning and would have been back in time to greet her."

"So something else happened," Kid concluded.

Black\*Star snorted, "She probably just got bored. I mean, it hasn't exactly been exciting around here."

"It-it's my fault!" Everyone turned their heads to Kim, who had lifted her head, "J-Jackie was acting strange last night, and I wasn't paying attention! I was too busy focusing on my sea witch spells! Now she's gone! She ran away!"

Kim broke down crying again. Maka settled a hand on Kim's head. The whole situation felt uneasy. At this point in a partnership, it was unheard for either rider or dragon to abandon the other like this. Kim mentioned that Jackie had been acting strange last night. Did that have something to do with it?

"Maybe she was in heat?" Maka suggested.

That got her some odd looks from the rest of the table. "Have you ever heard of a dragon being in heat?" Kid asked.

Maka looked down at her food, "I don't know. You know we didn't get taught as much dragon lore as we should have."

"I suppose its one possibility," Ox admitted.

Black\*Star looked over Kim, "Sheesh, with how upset she is, I'm surprised we aren't in the middle of a hurricane."

"Black\*Star!" Maka hissed. She looked around the table, "Here's what we'll do. We'll saddle up, and look for Jackie. With any luck, she hasn't left the island."

Everyone agreed with this course of action. They finished eating, and after a brief trip to the kitchens to claim the dragons' share of the food, split up.

When Maka reached Soul's barn, she found the white dragon already outside. He was laying on the ground, head up, and seemed to be enjoying the cool morning breeze. She thought about how easy it would be for him to just spread his wings and take off, leaving her behind forever. She placed the barrel of fish next to him and reached out to stroke him.

"You wouldn't leave me that easily, would you?" She glanced up at him. He looked down at her. Sensing her distress, he reached his head down and nuzzled her affectionately, making a soothing noise. She giggled, smiling, reaching her arms around his neck for a hug before retreating.

Soul shoved his head into the nearby barrel and began eating. Maka smile became smaller when she looked down and she noticed the scar poking out on Soul's skin. The scar ran along the length of his stomach. He had gotten it protecting her from a crazed wild dragon. Seeing it reminded her of how dedicated he was to her.

The dragons could leave at any time. If they left, they would have the freedom they enjoyed before having a rider to order them around. But then, they also had reason to stay, given food, shelter from the elements, and the companionship of their riders.

While Soul was busy eating, Maka got out the riding saddle and her harness from the barn. She checked over both of them, making sure the leathers were in good condition. She then strapped the saddle to her friend's back as he finished eating.

She reached over to his head and stroked his head spikes, "Listen, Jacqueline went missing last night. She wasn't in her barn this morning." Soul made a distressed noise. Maka nodded, "Yeah, my thoughts too. We're going to meet up with the others, then spread out and see if we can find her."

She climbed onto his back and got herself comfortable in the saddle. She took a minute to adjust the straps that kept her to Soul's back. She then reached forward and stroked his neck.

"Usual meeting spot. We can do a few stretchers on the way."

Soul made a noise, then stood up. He shook himself, then spread his wings. Maka took a deep breath and leaned forward. He took off.

No matter how many times it happened the initial takeoff was always simultaneously exciting and terrifying. Even the most experienced riders couldn't fight the adrenaline that always instinctively accompanied the falling feeling in one's gut.

They could however, recover from it quickly. Maka only took a few seconds. She exhaled before taking in her surroundings.

Below, she could see the village. Beyond the village were the forests and the mountain that made up the rest of the island. The seas surrounding it were rough today and she gave a silent prayer of safety to the fishing boats she saw. She also spared a thought as to how, despite the number of riders that lived on the island, there weren't very many dragon barns in the village.

Soul dove forward, his wings flapping as he carried them to the 'usual spot.' The spot was a clearing in the forest just outside the village. As he got closer, Maka saw that Ox was already there, identified by the blue and white dragon he rode, who was sitting upright and still like a guardian statue..

Soul came in for a landing. Maka dismounted while her dragon tried to get the blue and white one's stoic attention. She also noticed that Kim was there, still sniffing but seemingly calmed down a bit.

"Maka," Ox nodded, "I see Soul's doing well."

"As well as he can be," Maka said, looking at the two dragons. "How's Havar this morning?"

"Some problems with static. I'm going to have to make sure that the barn is well-grounded and that there aren't any cracks in the fireproofing." Havar, the blue and white dragon, was special, in that he was the rare dragon who could use something other than fire. In his case, lightning.

The sound of leathery flapping and Maka looked up. Kid was coming in with a large pink dragon. A smaller pink one flew alongside them, flitting through the air energetically. They all landed in the clearing. The smaller one immediately darted up to Soul, and they engaged in what Maka could only assume was the draconic equivalent of conversation.

"Black\*Star's not here yet?" Kid asked, as he dismounted. The dragon he was riding gave him a glance before walking over to gently nudge her sister out of the way and take a spot with the other dragons.

"He's probably showing off to the village before he comes here," Maka said, "Unless Tsubaki decides to just bring him straight here. Doubt that's going to happen though."

Kid sighed, "I will always wonder how Black\*Star became a rider in the first place. Its sometimes hard to believe that he managed to befriend a dragon with that ego of his."

"Guess Tsubaki must have found him charming or something." Maka glanced at the dragons. The larger of the pink dragons was Liz, and the smaller pink one was what they assumed to be her sister, called Patty. Kid rode Liz, but Patty followed them everywhere, to the point where he had ended up naming her and taking her in as well. He didn't feel comfortable riding the smaller dragon yet.

Ox followed her gaze, and smiled sadly, "Its amazing how they put up with us sometimes, isn't it? How they could leave at anytime but chose not to?" Kim sniffed next to him and he quickly turned to her, "Don't worry my precious Kim!" He exclaimed, "I'm sure there's a good

reason why Jacqueline left! We'll find her and find out what that reason is!"

Kim nodded, "I hope so..."

They heard flapping again and looked up. The cream colored dragon known as Tsubaki was wheeling in. Which meant...

"YAHOO! HEY GUYS!"

Maka sighed as Tsubaki landed. Black\*Star immediately leapt off her back. She leaned down and gave him a worried glance. He beamed up at her, "Don't worry, I'm fine!" She seemed to accept this and went to join the others.

"So!" He said, "What's the plan?"

Ox dug into one of his pockets and pulled out a map, "I've been discussing it with Kim while we were waiting. We'll split up and search the island. We'll need to search the caves and probably do some groundwork in the forest as well. We can't leave any stone unturned! If we can't find her on the island, we'll start searching some of the others nearby."

He held out the map in front of them. Several sections were circled, "I've decided where each of you should search based on our abilities. Kid, is Patty trained enough that she can alert you if she find something?"

Kid nodded, "Yes, she can do that well enough."

"Good! You have the largest search area then, here," he pointed to the map, "Use Patty to cover more ground quickly. Black\*Star, you'll search here. Maka, you'll look here. Me and Kim are going to look here." He pointed to each section of the map as he spoke.

Kid nodded, "Sounds like a fair plan."

Black\*Star shot up, "Let's get to it then! Jackie's not going to find herself!" He ran over to the dragons. "Tsubaki! Let's go!"

The dragon made a distressed noise. Still, she lowered herself to allow Black\*Star to mount her back. A moment later, they both took off.

"We better get going as well," Kid said. They all walked over to the dragons. Their 'conversation,' Maka noted, seemed to have taken on an agitated tone. In fact, they all seemed rather distressed.

She walked over to Soul, stroked his side, then the side of his head when he brought it over to her, "What's wrong?" She asked, "Is Jackie's disappearance bothering you?"

Soul made a noise that she could only take as an affirmative. She smiled sadly, "Don't worry! We'll find her!" She mounted him and glanced at the others, who were also getting on. Kim was riding with Ox.

"When do we meet up?"

"We'll meet back here at sunset," Kid declared, "And report the results of our search."

There was mutual agreement and they took off for their parts of the island. Maka looked over her shoulder, watching as her friends disappeared.

She then leaned forward and patted Soul's neck. She really hoped they could find Jackie.

n/n/n/n/

"Soul, wait, let's land over here."

The dragon gave her an odd glance, but did as he was told. He came in for a landing in a familiar part of the forest. Maka dismounted and gazed around.

"This is where..."

She looked up at him, "Do you remember, this is where I finally became your rider. Its also where..."

Something caught in her throat and she looked away. Instead, she observed the surrounding area.

This was where she had had an unlucky encounter with the savage black dragon, Ragnarok. Soul was the one who had come to her rescue. The two of them had already interacted plenty of times before, and while they got along, somewhat, Soul had shown no indication of accepting her as a rider.

That had changed after the events that had happened here. Maka had been cornered by Ragnarok. By some miracle, Soul had been flying by. He had dove in and fought the vicious wild dragon. He had gotten badly injured in the process, earning him his scar.

Yet he had managed to drive Ragnarok away. Maka had gone to get help, as Soul was too injured to fly. She had refused to leave his side as he retrieved and later as he recovered.

It was after he was fully recovered that it happened. She could remember it clearly. Coming out of her house to see Soul there. Him allowing her to climb onto his back. The first flight that always marked a dragon's acceptance of a rider and the advent of a new pair.

Soul's head stretched over and he made a concerned noise. Maka turned around and smiled, "Sorry, just lost in some old memories." She walked over to his back and climbed back into the saddle, "Come on, we have a lot of ground left to cover before sunset."

The dragon gave her one last look before taking off.

She couldn't imagine life without Soul anymore. Hopefully she wouldn't have to anytime soon.

n/n/n/n/

The search had been futile.



Maka had looked everywhere in her assigned part of the island, yet there was no sign of Jackie. She had checked the caves and walked over every inch of the forest. There was no indication that a dragon had recently been there.

It was with a heavy heart that she went back to the clearing. She hoped that the others had better luck. Given the looks on their faces, she didn't think so.

Kim was even more distressed now. No one else was in better shape either. A dragon didn't simply disappear without reason. It left all of them in a dreadful mood.

Maka didn't sleep in her house that night. She didn't think she could. Instead, she took refuge in Soul's barn.

She didn't mind the cold. She had always had a much higher tolerance for freezing weather than anyone else. It also helped that she was curled up next to Soul's warm body.

She petted him, while he eyed her, seemingly worried and making distressed noises. His tail swished agitatedly.

"Poor Kim," she whispered, "This is so hard on her. I can't imagine being in her position." She gazed at Soul, looking into his eyes. Would those red eyes disappear like Jackie did one day? "You...won't run away, will you? I mean, you're a pain sometimes but you're still my friend. More than that you're my best friend and I love you."

At those last words Soul reached forward with his head and nuzzled the top of her. Maka smiled at the affectionate gesture.

"Hope you don't mind that I'm staying here tonight."

His response to that was to lay his head down. His eyes began to droop. "Yeah, it is getting pretty late." She lay against him, using his body like a pillow. She stared at the roof of the barn, thinking over the day's events.

Eventually, she felt her eyelids grow heavy. Curling up closer to her dragon, she fell asleep.

n/n/n/n/

When Maka woke up, the first she noticed was that she was on the ground.

The second thing she noticed was that Soul was gone.

She gasped and quickly scrambled to her feet. She looked around, panic seizing her. No, please, no!

There was no sign of the dragon. Aside from some white scales where he had laid.

She began poking around the barn, looking for any other clues as to what happened. The whole time, her mind was on overdrive.

Please! She needed Soul! She needed him so badly! He was half of her,

the reason she was a rider. He had been with her through so much, and they had grown close through it all. He couldn't be gone! He just couldn't!

She glanced at the barn door. It was open a little. Not nearly enough for a dragon to get through, but it wasn't much of a stretch to think that Soul was smart enough to figure out how to close it behind him. They didn't keep the barn door locked as a rule. The dragons were friends and companions, not pets to keep trapped in a cage.

Yet had friendship and companionship not been enough? Maka collapsed onto her knees, feeling tears well in her eyes. Had it all not been enough?

If she had been in her right mind, she would have realized that there was no possible way for the dragon to leave without waking her up. She was a light sleeper, and would have felt him get up from under her, heard him slip out.

It would have been her first clue that something else was going on. As it was, she barely heard when someone entered the barn.

She didn't notice the new arrival until he was close. At that point, she finally noticed the sound of his footsteps. Her head shot up.

She didn't recognize the boy, about her age, that had entered. And she knew everyone in the village. That alone caused her to leap to her feet and back up.

"Who are you!" She demanded.

He brought his hands forward in a 'calm down' gesture. He had spiky white hair, and tan skin. He was a fur vest over his shirt, and simple leather pants.

"Calm down," he said, "Look I know this looks bad but..."

"You didn't answer my question!" She hissed, "Who are you? Are you from the Arachnophobia tribe? Give me one good reason why I shouldn't report you to the elders!"

"Maka! W-"

"How do you know my name!"

The boy sighed, running a hand through his hair, "Because I know you!'

She glared hard at him, "That doesn't make any sense!"

"Yes, it does! Maka, its me, its Soul!"

Maka's glare grew even more heated, "You're lying," she hissed, "Soul is a dragon."

"Its a really long story," he admitted, "But Maka, please, look into my eyes and tell me I'm not Soul..."

Despite her reservations, she made eye contact with him. His eyes,

she realized, were red. And they were sparkling with the same mirth, friendliness and intelligence that she had always associated with...

Her hand flew to her mouth, "Soul?"

He nodded, "Yeah..." he came forward slowly and touched her arm, "Its me..."

Question whirled in her mind. So many questions. "How...you're human..."

"Really long story, like I said," he sighed and withdrew, "Sorry for vanishing like that, but I wanted to get dressed. I didn't think you wanted to see me naked after the shift happened."

"Shift?"

He sighed again and looked away from her, "There's a lot to explain." His tone suddenly rose, "Scorch it! Why did this happen now?" He turned back to her, "We need to check on the others. Make sure that they didn't bolt like Jackie did."

"Wait, what?" Maka looked at him, feeling utterly lost, "What do you mean? Do you know what happened to Jackie?"

"We have a pretty good idea," he admitted, "We don't know where she is though. She's probably secluded in some hidden cave somewhere on the island." He reached forward and grabbed her arm, "We really need to check on the others. If any of them chose to run, they won't have gotten far."

It was the urgency in his voice that led her to follow his lead. Soul led her out of the barn and into the village. He led her in the direction of what she knew was Liz and Patty's home.

The questions bubbled up again, "Why would they run away?" She asked.

"Because they can't handle the shift," he said simply.

"Huh?"

"Think of it this way. How would you react if you suddenly woke up one day as a dragon?"

She looked down, "I see."

"Normally, the riders tell you guys about this stuff. Of course, they had to be dragged away, along with the elder dragons, leaving all of us without any rudders to help us fly. Jackie likely ran because she didn't know how to explain herself to Kim."

Now it was starting to make sense, "I get it," Maka muttered, "Kim might not believe her. That combined with the shock..." She looked up again, "By why not tell any of us this to start with?"

"Simply put, we dragons treat the shift the way you human treat sex. The riders respect that."

It was all starting to click into place. The reason older wild dragons were rarely seen. Why there weren't many dragon barns. The reason why there never seemed to be as many dragons in the village as Maka knew there were. Why sometimes new people appeared in the village without explanation.

It was all so much, as the two of them finally reached the place where Liz and Patty were kept.

The first thing she noticed was that there were two unfamiliar girls in front of the barn. The second thing she noticed was that Kid was passed out.

"Oh gods! Kid!" She broke away from Soul and ran over to the other boy. He was out cold on the ground. "What happened!"

"Shock, mostly," the elder of the two girl said, "It doesn't seem to be much worse than one of his symmetry fits, so he'll probably be fine."

Maka glanced up at the two girls. The elder, older than Maka, was looked at Kid with exasperation. The other, younger one, about Maka's age, was laughing to herself and had a big smile on her face.

The younger seemed to notice that Maka was staring and gave her a cheerful smile, "Morning Maka!"

The cheerful personality brought her into sharp clarity, "Patty?" She looked at the older girl, "And then...You must be Liz..."

"Yep, I see Soul gave you the rundown," She placed her hands on her hips, "Honestly, I was a bit overdue for this. Tsubaki too. But shifts have always happened in groups so..."

"What is the shift?" Maka asked, looking at Liz.

Liz glanced at Soul, "You didn't tell her?"

Soul rolled his eyes, before looking at her again, "I thought one of you could explain better. I didn't really pay attention when they were explaining this. Besides, you're older, so you would know better in order to be ready for it, right?"

Liz's look became a glare, "I barely paid attention myself! And just because I'm older doesn't mean that I took it better!"

"Sheesh, no need to be so sharp about it..."

Liz took a deep breath and looked back at Maka, "Sorry. Out of all of us, Jacqueline's the only one who really payed attention and understood this. Havar and Tsubaki paid attention, but they never really got it.

"The best way I can put it is, when we dragons reach a certain point in our lives, we shift, or change, into a human form," Liz sounded like she was reciting from a book or frequently heard lecture. Likely the latter. "This human form is a mark of our maturity, and is a vital step to becoming an adult. Or that's what the elders always tell us. After the initial shift, we become capable of changing

between human and dragon at will.

"In other words, we're shapeshifters. With time, our human form is to become as comfortable and familiar as our dragon form. For those dragons who have riders, it marks a new phase in their relationship. For so-called 'wild' dragons, it usually marks their debut into human culture."

"So that's why you're suddenly like this." The voice drew their attention over to the side. Kid was standing there, looking thoughtful.

Liz stared at him, looked at the spot where he had been passed out a second ago, then looked back, "When did you...? How did you...? Urgh! Never mind!"

"How do you change back?" Kid asked.

Liz rubbed a spot on her temple, "That's part of our problem. Normally, our elders are supposed to teach us how to change between forms. But they're gone so..."

"We'll just have to figure it out ourselves," Soul said, speaking up, "I mean, there have been plenty of dragons who grew up on their own and figured it out."

"True."

"We'll want to see the others," Kid said, "See if it happened to anyone else."

"It probably did. Like I said, shifts happen in groups. Its supposedly a way to give us peers to share the experience with," Liz gestured to Soul, "If he and Patty shifted along with me, then its pretty much guaranteed the others did too."

As they worked their way to the next barn, it turned out Kid was as full of questions as Maka was. However, his questions were less about the mechanics of the shift, and more personal things. He was eager to find out what exactly the sisters thought of him.

Maka hung back near Soul, feeling incredibly awkward. She couldn't even look at him as they walk.

Soul was the one to break the ice, "Are you okay?" He asked.

Maka looked at the ground. Finally, she decided to ask the question that had secretly eating at her since Jacqueline had gone missing.

"Do you like me?" She asked.

Soul blinked at her, "Hah?"

"I mean, I know I treat you well, at least I hope I do, but do you like me? Like this? I mean, you could have left at anytime but-"

He cut her off before she could continue, "Maka, stop." When she looked up at him, he was giving her an amused smile. "Of course I like you. I wouldn't have stuck around if I didn't. I'm not going to

run away, don't worry."

Maka weakly smiled back. It was then that they heard a voice coming from further down the path.

"Hey, guys!" Maka looked and saw Ox along with Kim and Black\*Star coming down the path. Two unfamiliar teenagers accompanied them. One was a girl with long black hair that she had styled into a ponytail. The other was a boy wearing something dark and strange on his face, covering his eyes.

Ox glanced at the group, "I see it happened to all of you too. Havar and Tsubaki gave us the rundown."

"What the shell are those Havar?" Soul came up to the unfamiliar boy, who adjusted the strange thing on his face.

"These?" The boy, Havar, asked, "Justin got them off a trader and gave them to me. They're called 'shades.' They're supposed to help dim the sun if its too bright for you or something. I thought they seemed nice, so I kept them as something to wear for the shift."

"You have strange tastes, have I mentioned that?"

"Several times."

"Ooooh, Tsubaki, you're really pretty!" Patty said, as the dragon-turned-humans gathered together.

The girl, Tsubaki, smiled shyly, "Thank you."

As the dragons chatted, the riders grouped nearby.

"Its incredible," Ox said, looking over the changed group, "From what I can tell, this is a vital part of a dragon's maturity process, enhancing their cognitive development."

Black\*Star cocked his head, "What does that mean...?"

"And how do you know that?" Maka added, eyeing Ox critically.

"Ah, Havar recited some of the speeches his teachers gave him," Ox explained, "I don't think he quite comprehended them. I combined that with what I already know. Have you ever noticed, Maka, how a dragon's physiology doesn't really lend itself well for the level of intelligence that they display?" She nodded. "This is their answer to it. At some point in the distant, whether through some sort of unknown biological process or strange magic, they developed the ability to 'shift' or change into humans. The dragons have a lot of different legends concerning how it initially came about.

"With the 'shift' came the intelligence and awareness that comes with being human. It effectively allowed them to achieve sentience. And since changes carry between forms, this intelligence stretched to their dragon forms as well. It was so thorough that they even passed it to their offspring.

"However, the same things that prevented them from becoming smart in the first place slowly wears away at this intelligence. A 'snap-back'

effect of sorts. Its necessary for them to go through this shift in order to counter that snap-back, as well as jump start the final stages of their mental development. I'm willing to bet that the unwilling 'abruptness' came about so as to counter those dragons who may be unwilling to change at all and lose the benefits of the shift."

Maka nodded in understanding, "I get it."

"I don't," Black\*Star said flatly, "Did you get any of that Kim?"

Kim furrowed her brow, "Kinda? I'm not sure. Its hard to understand him when he goes full-on nerd like that."

"What Ox is saying is," Kid said patiently, "That this 'shift,' this change into humans is the reason why they are smart in the first place, and required to maintain it."

"Oh, I think I get it now," Black\*Star put his hands behind his head, "So what happens to dragons who don't change?"

"You know Ragnarok?" Ox asked.

Maka shivered at the thought of the black dragon, "I almost wish I didn't."

"Well he's a dragon who never went through the shift. He slowly lost his mind because of it, and has now been reduced to the very beast that his ancestors were."

Maka shivered. What an awful fate! To lose your mind to the point where you were nothing more than an animal!

"So, what do we do now?" Kid asked, "From what I've gathered, Jackie went through the shift, panicked, and is now somewhere on the island, hiding out. How do we find her?"

"That I'm not sure," Ox admitted, "However, we can be sure that she's still somewhere on the island. We just need to look harder."

Kim sighed, "I'm just glad that she didn't actually run away!"

"For now," Ox continued, "I think we need to get them adjusted and settled in first. We also need to help them in figuring out how to change back. From what I've been told, Jackie will be able to hold on for another day. I'm sorry Kim," he added upon seeing her fallen expression, "You can try looking for her on your own. But the rest of us have more urgent priorities right now."

Kim nodded sadly, "I understand."

A loud growl interrupted them. Black\*Star stretched, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm starving! Let's get some breakfast!"

n/n/n/n/

"Are you mad at me?"

Maka started and looked up at Soul. They were sitting at a table in the main hall, having served themselves food. Their neighbors didn't really seem to notice the newcomers, and Maka suspected that they were aware of the situation to a degree.

In addition to a fish, Maka noted how Soul had piled his plate with a wide variety of greenery. Thinking back, aside from a few wild berries, he hadn't had much chance to eat anything besides fish. Fruits and vegetables were a new experience for him.

"Why would I be mad?" She asked.

"You haven't said much to me today," he said, "You're usually are only this unresponsive when you're extremely depressed or mad at me. I can't think of why you would be depressed, so..."

She sighed and shook her head, "I'm not mad. I'm just...in shock. This, changes so much..."

"Well, think of this. I'm finally able to tell you how boring those books of yours are."

She snapped her head to him, "What? But I read to you all the time and you never seem to mind!"

"Seriously? I'm asleep through most of it. You never noticed?"

She looked away, embarrassed. She supposed she wouldn't notice, being so caught up in her books.

"There are a lot of other upsides to this too," he smiled at her, "I've...actually been really looking forward to this...really interacting with you, you know. You're an interesting person Maka, and I've been wanting to hold a real conversation with you since I hit shifting age."

She didn't meet his eyes, aware that she was flushing under the praise, "Eat your food. We'll go out and...do something when we're done with breakfast."

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So, hopefully this was a much better effort! I hope you all enjoyed this!

I added Ox, Havar, Kim and Jacqueline to the story because they also work well with the dragonriding concept. I didn't include Kilk because he doesn't work well (because both of his weapons are toddlers).  
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End  
file.